

How UTS Changed Karen Wilkening's Life

Kate Pugnoli
July 12, 2017



For someone whose early life was impacted by constant moving, Karen Wilkening's past few decades have resonated with the kind of stability and family life she longed for as a child. Born in Denver, Colorado her childhood was marked by constant uprooting. By the time she was ten her family had moved eight times due to her father's frequent job transfers. When she was eleven her parents parted ways. She admits that because of the constant moving it was not easy to make and keep friends. Karen states, "The solid family I longed for simply wasn't there." Her mother, a teacher, eventually remarried and the family moved to Missouri.

Despite the constant moving, Karen was always an excellent student, but felt unchallenged in high school, though she always took art courses and discovered painting as her great passion.

Her father died before she was eighteen years old leaving her with a social security benefit – enough to put her through college. She applied to University of Massachusetts, Amherst an hour outside of Boston. There she got her undergraduate degree in education. "I wanted to do something that involved younger people who were hopefully less damaged by life; I really felt I could make a positive impact in the lives of young children." As much as she loved art she did not pursue an art degree because she knew she wanted to be able to work more directly with people.

"The seminary was the first time in my life that I was really able to cultivate friendships. Having close friends really filled a hole in my heart." Still, even at UTS, she pursued her own course. "I was probably a hard person to pigeon hole. Some of my friends were very conservative in many respects, but then I had my crazy friends to stay out late with and go dancing or hang out in New York City on the weekends. But I'd always be back at school ready to help organize an event or cook a big breakfast for my classmates."

Karen stayed at UTS as a third year Divinity student. She chose faith and moral development as her thesis topic. “While at UTS, every class I took, every paper I wrote was moving me in the direction of education. My primary interest was how people grow; everything in life is really about growth. Even difficulties have to be digested in order to grow.”

After graduating from UTS in 1985, Karen moved to Maryland and with her teaching degree taught at a Catholic school. Her home was the gathering place for a group of women who wanted to create an alternative to the public schools in Maryland. This initial meeting gave birth to the [New Hope Academy](#) (NHA) where Karen eventually became a teacher. “My year at the Catholic school was tough; I had a classroom of 37 students! I needed to rethink teaching, as the experience was not great. I took a job with a Washington, DC based ballet company, but when my second son was born I left the ballet company and in 1992 I joined the staff of the NHA. I really kind of stumbled into the kindergarten age group because they needed a teacher at that level.”

Reflecting on the rewards of working with this age group, she says, “The children come in as babies with lots of needs, but when they leave, they are becoming skilled, independent young people. There is so much growth that takes place between five and six years of age. Children of that age sometimes can’t tie their shoes, write or read; they are still learning to socialize. By the end of the year, they are little thinkers and problem solvers.”

At NHA there is a strong emphasis on character education. Karen states: “I often walk the kids through Socratic dialogues. One day a child asked, “Why are rich people bad? So Karen posed the question “Does that mean poor people are good? Why are they good? Who wants to be poor?” But ironically, none of the children wanted to be poor! The class went back and forth in the discussion and concluded that some rich people were good because they often helped poor people, and sometimes poor people are not good because they commit crimes. Taking this approach, children have to reflect and formulate their own conclusions.”

“Rather than have classroom rules, we have a Code of Conduct. I’m more interested in teaching children about integrity. I infuse the classroom with opportunities to develop good character. The question of how we treat each other is always there.” At UTS “I really learned how critical it is to treat everyone with respect. It is important to teach children early to honor each person.”

Although Karen has been at NHA for many years she is in the process of reinventing herself. She has taken the course work necessary to become certified as a reading specialist and will expand her teaching beyond kindergarten and through the middle school grades.

“When I reflect on my life there are a lot of years behind and not as many ahead. I really do enjoy teaching so I didn’t want to give it up because it allows me to expand my abilities to reach more people.”

“I am finding that as one becomes older, one wants to leave a legacy. I would like to be a person who can live large, but sometimes I struggle to keep hope in people. In my early life I was a rolling stone, but I created stability through my marriage and family.” Karen feels that raising her two sons to adulthood is the accomplishment of which she is most proud. “Both my sons are blessed with many abilities – and they both want to do things in their lives to help others. Perhaps they can live large in their lives.”

Karen Wilkening lives in Silver Springs, MD with her husband Christoph, also a UTS alumnus. When not caught up in teaching, painting and making pottery, Karen enjoys traveling and visiting with friends and her far flung sons and their families.